

My name is Donna Bailey, and I am the Director of the Addison County Parent/Child Center (ACPCC). Thank you for inviting me to speak to you about the importance of Reach Up funding for families and the need for Vermont to be thoughtful in helping families to move out of poverty.

I would like to take a moment to acknowledge that Vermont recently lost a leader in the fight to end poverty and to treat people and the planet with dignity, Kurt McCormick. It is in his spirit that this council is moving forward, and it makes me proud to be a Vermonter.

Parent/Child Centers help young families, and we have a focus on helping the most vulnerable families in Vermont – many have lived in generational poverty. A two generational approach is important to breaking the cycle of poverty – supporting parents means better outcomes for children. In our country, we have been through many policy changes, and we continue to have cultural attitudes that place the blame of being poor on the person living in poverty. We know that this is not accurate, as most Americans who are poor are children. We also know that more women live in poverty than men – these facts tell us we have work to do in terms of equity and policy and that it is not the fault of the individual. There is shame and stigma attached to poverty and there are many cultural and political biases that promote these divisions. This is a systemic issue we need to solve in our state and nation.

I have been at the ACPCC since 1998, and I have seen many changes for the good in our society. Due to programs that have been in place for 50 years, people have gained in literacy rates, teen pregnancy has dropped by 40%, more people have access to training programs and education and childcare and we are all better off in some ways. People are still struggling financially and in terms of basic needs. Housing, food, transportation and healthcare are still a struggle.

I think it is important to recognize that even through all the policy changes – from TANF being an entitlement program during the Carter administration to welfare to work – with time limits and more- average stays on welfare have not changed significantly. What this tells me is that TANF is a basic safety net that families turn to when they have no other choice. It is also true that families do not enjoy being on “welfare” – it is demeaning, degrading and hard. There are so many hoops to jump through – paperwork, follow up paperwork, appointments, judgements by others, fear of state systems taking children, lack of natural supports and the need to rely on community agencies and mostly, not enough money. I recently spent 4 hours on hold waiting for a mandatory appointment for my own child-only grant. I have a phone plan and a flexible schedule, but I sat there fuming at the reality of what it means for a young parent who must use all their phone minutes and

then have people judge them for not calling back or being able to complete the call. This is unacceptable.

We use outdated figures to determine what a family needs for income and then we say a family can have half of that amount. We then tell folks to take budgeting classes – I don't know about you, but I think that any single mother with one child who can budget \$536 for groceries in a month and \$665 for all other expenses has budgeting down. It is important that we help families as they need help and support – budgeting may be one thing some families need, but I recoil at the idea that a budgeting class will change the basic unfair economic structure we have. We need to increase the amount of money families get by updating the formula used to determine amounts. This will require increased spending, and it is important for Vermonters to have their basic needs met.

I believe a successful Reach Up program in Vermont would mean there are more people enrolled, not less. It would increase income for families. There would be enough to help people with basic needs and in moving to a place of being self-sufficient, without falling off the economic cliff that awaits many recipients now – no health care, supports for housing, no safety net. In a successful program, childhood poverty would not be ending because of a tax credit – yes that helps, but there are so many other economic and social factors that impact a family's level of poverty. A successful system would be based on prevention and support, not penalizing. We would not be waiting for people to have to be late on rent to get support, or to get cut from Reach Up and health care without the necessary help to stay on. These punitive approaches are stressful and degrading. To support people to do better, we need a strength-based, developmentally appropriate approach that considers each family's strengths and needs – education, training, transportation, mental health, physical health and basic needs.

With the existing punitive approach for families, there is a cost-shift to community agencies. In a preventative approach, the system would work with community agencies to support individual families with dignity. The way people get cut off from Medicaid and Reach Up impacts our agency's work with families. We have to bill and when folks are taken off Medicaid, Reach Up or housing due to a form not handed in in time, we don't get paid and the family is in crisis, requiring more support, not less, so we are spending more time with the family. This is not the best we can do.

I am so glad that this council is meeting again, and I look forward to working with all of you to help end childhood poverty in Vermont. If children and families in this great state are poor, we are failing. Our state could help children and families thrive not just survive. It is a matter of priorities. Thank you.